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NOTES ON "CAPABILITIES" IN NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

by Abbot E. Smith

I

WHEN CIA was established with the mission of producing "national" intelligence it perforce drew heavily for doctrine upon the military intelligence agencies. Over the years, the intelligence organizations of the armed forces had developed a well-tested routine. Formulas were available to meet various requirements. Agreement had gradually been reached on what needed to be known about the enemy, what data were necessary for the estimate, why they were necessary, and how they could most usefully be presented. CIA had no counterpart to this doctrine. It therefore frequently borrowed from the military, and in no instance was this borrowing more conspicuous than in the matter of "capabilities."

The doctrine of enemy capabilities is one of the most characteristic and useful that military intelligence has to offer. A *capability* is a course of action or a faculty for development which lies within the capacity of the person or thing concerned. More particularly, in military intelligence, enemy capabilities are courses of action of which the enemy is physically capable and which would, if adopted and carried through, affect our own commander's mission.* In short, a list of enemy capabili-

* "*capabilities, enemy* — Those courses of action of which the enemy is physically capable and which if adopted will affect the accomplishment of our mission. The term "capabilities" includes not only the general courses of action open to the enemy such as attack, defense, or withdrawal but also all the particular courses of action possible under each general course of action. "Enemy capabilities" are considered in the light of all known factors affecting military operations including time, space, weather, terrain, and the strength and disposition of enemy forces . . ." *Dictionary of United States Military Terms for Joint Usage*, issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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ties is a list of the things that the enemy can *do*. It is therefore apt to be the most significant part of a military intelligence officer's "Estimate of the Enemy Situation."

It is true, of course, that a military intelligence officer collects and transmits to his commander a great deal of other information. He reports on the weather, terrain, and communications in the zone of operations. He may set forth the politics and economics of the area. He collects and evaluates data on the enemy's order of battle, logistical apparatus, equipment, weapons, morale, training and the like. All this is made known to the commander, but it is still not a statement of enemy capabilities. Only when the intelligence officer has acquired all this information, and constructively brooded over it, can he set about describing the courses of action open to the enemy. It is this list of capabilities that tells the commander what, under the conditions existing in the area, the enemy can *do* with his troops, his weapons, and his equipment to affect the commander's own mission. The enumeration and description of enemy capabilities is the ultimate, or at least the penultimate, goal of military intelligence. It is one of the characteristic modes to which the great mass of intelligence information available is bent, in order to give the commander the knowledge of the enemy he needs to plan his own operations.

Adaptation of this doctrine to the requirements of national intelligence presents at first no real difficulty. Courses of action may be attributed to persons, organizations, parties, nations, or groups of nations as well as to military units, and to friendly or neutral, as well as to enemy, powers. They may be political, economic, psychological, diplomatic, and so on, as well as military. It is true that a national intelligence estimate* is not made for a military commander with a clearly defined

* Throughout this paper the term "national intelligence estimate" is used generally to mean not just the solemnly coordinated "National Intelligence Estimates" approved by the Intelligence Advisory Committee, but any estimate, great or small, made by any office or person producing national intelligence.

mission, to which enemy capabilities may be referred to ascertain if they do in fact "affect" the carrying-out of that mission. An equivalent for the commander's mission is not far to seek, however, since national intelligence is obviously concerned only with foreign courses of action which may affect the policies or interests — above all the security interests — of the United States. It is by no means as easy to be clear about all the policies and interests of the United States, and to perceive what might affect them, as it is to understand the mission of a military commander, which is supposed to be unequivocally stated in a directive from higher authority. But this is one of the reasons why a national intelligence estimate is apt to be more difficult to prepare than a military estimate of an enemy situation.

In national intelligence, then, capabilities may be defined as *courses of action within the power of a foreign nation or organization which would, if carried out, affect the security interests of the United States.*

It is probably unnecessary to argue that statements of capabilities are useful as a means of organizing and presenting national intelligence. The parallel with military intelligence doctrine seems perfectly sound. High policy-makers doubtless want to be supplied with authoritative descriptions and analyses of the politics, economics, and military establishments of various foreign nations, together with explanations of the objectives, policies, and habitual modes of action of these nations. They need to have the best possible statistics, diagrams, pictures, and data in general. But when all the labor and research has been finished, the results collated and criticized, and the conclusions written down, it will still be worthwhile to go on to a statement of what each foreign nation or organization can *do* to affect the interests of the United States. This is the statement of capabilities.

In recognizing, formulating, testing, and presenting foreign capabilities, intelligence doctrine comes into its own. Apart from the special function of intelligence operations in collecting

data, most of the preliminary spade-work for intelligence estimates is the province of other disciplines than that specifically of intelligence. This spade-work of course takes nine-tenths of the time, trouble, and space devoted to any estimate. Political scientists analyze the structure of government and politics in a foreign state; economists lay bare its economic situation; order-of-battle men reveal the condition of the military establishment; sociologists, historians, philosophers, natural scientists, and all manner of experts make their contribution. When all this has been done it is the peculiar function of intelligence itself to see that the learning and wisdom of experts is directed towards determining what the foreign nation can *do* to affect US interests. Thereby the major disciplines of social and natural science are turned to the special requirements of intelligence estimates.

Let us be careful not to confuse this with the function of prophecy. To predict what a foreign nation *will* do is a necessary and useful pursuit, albeit dangerous; it rests on knowledge, judgment, experience, divination, and luck. To set forth what a nation *can* do is a different matter. One still needs judgment, experience and luck as well as knowledge, but soothsaying is reduced to a minimum. There is an element of the scientific. The job can be taught, and its techniques refined. It can be reduced to doctrine.

II

Generally speaking, in military usage an enemy capability is stated without reference to the possible counteractions which one's own commander may devise to offset or prevent such action. The Navy's handbook entitled *Sound Military Decision* puts it this way (italics added): "Capabilities . . . indicate actions which the force concerned, *unless forestalled or prevented from taking such actions,* has the capacity to carry out."

Here are three examples:

a. The Bloc has the capability to launch large-scale, short-haul amphibious operations in the Baltic and Black Seas.

b. The USSR has the capability to launch general war.

c. The Chinese Communists have the capability to commit and to support approximately 150,000 troops in Indochina.

These statements give no estimate of what the effects or results of any of these courses of action might be. There is no indication for example that the United States or some other power might be able to make it difficult or impossible for the Chinese Communists to support 150,000 troops in Indochina, or that the West might possess such strength that a Soviet decision to launch general war would be tantamount to suicide. The statements simply lay down what the nations concerned could do, without regard to any possible opposition or counteraction. Such unopposed capabilities are frequently referred to as "gross" or "raw" capabilities. They are the kind of enemy capabilities which are reported to a military commander by his G-2, in the "Estimate of the Enemy Situation."

The high policy-makers for whom national intelligence is designed, however, are not in the comparatively simple position of military commanders facing an enemy. They have broader fields to cover, and more numerous problems to face. They need to have a picture of the security situation in the world as a whole and in various areas of the world. This picture ought to show not only the multifarious forces which exist, but also the probable resultants of these forces as they act upon each other, or as they might act upon each other if they were set in motion. The policy-makers need, in short, to know about *net* capabilities, not merely about gross or raw capabilities.

This is well understood and accepted as long as the courses of action of foreign nations alone are concerned. Nobody would think of enumerating the capabilities of France, for example, without giving due consideration to the frequently opposing capabilities of Germany, and to the tangential capa-

bilities of Great Britain and other powers. Even in the purely military sphere, statements of net capabilities occur in national estimates. For example:

a. In Israel, an army of 49,000 . . . is capable of defeating any of its immediate neighbors.

b. The Chinese Communists have the capability for conquering Burma.

c. We believe that the Chinese Communists are capable of taking the island of Quemoy if opposed by Chinese Nationalist forces only.

It is an intricate and difficult operation even to attempt to work out the probable resultants of the enormous forces actually or potentially at work in the world — political, economic, military, and the like. Without such an operation, however — sometimes called "war-gaming" when limited strictly to the military sphere — national intelligence estimates of capabilities would lose much of their usefulness for the particular purpose they are designed to serve.

Obviously no estimate of the security situation anywhere in the world will be worth much unless the capabilities of the United States are taken into account and their effect weighed. At this point, however, grave practical difficulties arise. We of the intelligence community are solemnly warned that we must not "G-2 our own policy." Military authorities are shocked at the suggestion that we should indulge in "war-gaming." We are told that it is the function of the commander, not of the intelligence officer, to decide what counteraction to adopt against enemy capabilities, and to judge what the success of such counteraction may be. It is pointed out that no adequate estimate of net military capabilities can be made without a full knowledge of US war plans, and a long and highly technical exercise in war-gaming by large numbers of qualified experts. Since intelligence agencies as such quite properly have no knowledge of US war plans, and possess no elaborate machinery for war-gaming, they are estopped from making

an estimate of *net* capabilities where US forces are significantly involved. As a result there is, for instance, no statement in any national intelligence estimate of how the military security situation on the continent of Europe really stands, i. e., of the probable net capabilities of Soviet forces against the opposition they would be likely to meet if they attempted an invasion of the continent.

This state of affairs is unfortunate, and the value of national intelligence estimates is thereby reduced below what it ought to be. The difficulty is really not one of intelligence doctrine, however. Practically nobody doubts that high policy-makers ought to be supplied with estimates of net capabilities even in situations where the US is actively engaged. It is agreed that they ought to have the best possible opinion on the security situation on the continent of Europe, and that they must be informed not merely of the gross capabilities of the USSR to launch air and other attacks on the US (the subject of an annual National Intelligence Estimate) but of what the USSR could probably accomplish by such an attack against the defenses that the US and its allies would put up. In one way or another policy-makers get such estimates of net capabilities, even if they have sometimes to make them themselves, off the cuff.

The question is, then, not whether estimates of net capabilities are legitimate requirements, but simply who shall make them. This problem is outside the scope of a paper on intelligence doctrine. It may be suggested, however, that the difficulty has probably been somewhat exaggerated. The jealous prohibition of "war-gaming," on grounds that to conduct it requires a knowledge of US war plans and an enormous apparatus with numerous personnel, is overdone. In four out of five situations where an estimate of net military capabilities is needed the judgment of wise and experienced military men, based on only a general knowledge of US war plans, is likely to be about as useful as the most elaborate and protracted piece of war-gaming. Such exercises have too often given the

wrong answer — they are really no more dependable as guides to the outcome of future wars than research in economics is dependable as an indicator of the future behavior of the stock market. This does not mean, of course, that economics and war-gaming are useless pursuits.

Gradually, indeed, the difficulties respecting estimates of net capabilities are disappearing. In the most critical situations — air attack on the United States, for example, and perhaps the security situation in Europe — it may be necessary to establish special machinery for the most careful playing-out of the problems and ascertainment of net capabilities. In less critical situations the trouble is solving itself. Military men are becoming a little less shy of making an educated guess as to net capabilities, even when US forces are involved, and the community is not as distressed as it used to be at the accusation of "G-2-ing US policy." A doctrine is gradually being evolved by trial and error, which is as it should be. Some day it may be desirable to commit the evolved doctrine to writing, but the time has not yet arrived.

III

Of course any foreign nation of consequence is physically capable of a vast number of courses of action which would affect the security interests of the United States. One task of intelligence (after the spade-work is complete) is to recognize these capabilities; another is to test them against known facts to make certain that they are real and not imaginary; a third is to test them one against another to see how many could be carried out simultaneously, and how many may be mutually exclusive; a fourth is to work out in reasonable detail the implications, for the nation concerned and for the United States, of the actual implementation of each important capability. I propose to pass over all these tasks without further discussion, and to concentrate on the problem of selecting from

among the capabilities those which are to be included in the formal estimate. For even after all the testing is finished there will still remain far too many capabilities to put into any document of reasonable size. Considerations of space, time, and the patience of readers make it imperative that some principles of exclusion be adopted, so that the list of capabilities presented will be useful rather than merely exhaustive.

Capabilities are excluded from national estimates for one of two reasons: either because they are judged unlikely to be actually adopted and carried through, or because they are considered to be so insignificant that they could be implemented without more than minor effect on the security interests of the United States. For short we may say that they are excluded on grounds either of improbability or of unimportance.

The second of these criteria does not require much discussion. Clearly it would be a waste of time and paper to fill a national estimate with lists of courses of action which, even if carried out, would affect the security interests of the United States only to an insignificant degree. One applies common sense in this matter, and forthwith rejects a great number of capabilities from further consideration. Along with common sense, however, there ought always to be plenty of specialized knowledge available. Everyone knows that an expert can sometimes point out major significance in things which are to the uninformed view negligible, and conversely that experts will sometimes inflate the importance of things which common sense and general knowledge can see in juster proportion. Out of discussion and argument on these matters comes the best verdict as to the importance or unimportance of a given foreign capability, and the best guidance as to whether it should be put into the formal estimate.

To reject any foreign capability because we judge it unlikely to be implemented is a more serious and difficult matter. Here indeed we part company with military doctrine, which frowns upon the exclusion from an estimate of any enemy capabilities whatever, and especially condemns any exclusion on grounds

of improbability. There has been much debate, among the military, on whether an intelligence officer should presume to put into his formal estimate an opinion as to which of the enemy capabilities listed is most likely to be implemented. It has been said that such a judgment is for the commander alone to make, and some have even held that the commander himself must not make it, but must treat all enemy capabilities as if they were sure to be carried through, and must prepare to deal with them all. This latter doctrine is somewhat academic. It is doubtful that any intelligence officer, or any commander worth his salt, has ever acted strictly in accordance with it. Yet it remains that according to the more rigorous teachings of military intelligence no enemy capability of any consequence may be omitted from the list presented to the commander. The disasters which can result from even a carefully considered exclusion have been frequently pointed out.

Nevertheless, in a national intelligence estimate we must for the reasons already stated exclude many foreign capabilities because we judge them unlikely to be carried out. The unlikelihood is in turn generally established on one or more of three grounds, namely, that implementation of the capability (a) would be unrelated to, or incompatible with, national objectives of the country under consideration; (b) would run counter to the political, moral, or psychological compulsions under which the nation, or its rulers, operate; or (c) would entail consequences so adverse as to be unprofitable.

The most obvious capabilities to exclude are those which, if implemented, would serve no objective of the nation under consideration, or would clearly run counter to some of that nation's objectives. Thus we do not bother about the possibility that the British might conquer Iceland, although they certainly could do so and if they did US security interests would be affected. The conquest of Iceland, however, would serve no British objective that we know of, at least in time of peace. Again, it is clearly within the power of the USSR to give up its Satellites, renounce its connections with Commu-

nist China, and retire modestly into isolation. Or the British might, in order to improve their economic condition, abandon all armaments and cease to be a world power. We do not give such capabilities serious consideration, however, because we believe them manifestly contrary to the fundamental aims of the Soviets and British respectively. By applying this sort of standard we can immediately reject a great number of courses of action which lie within the power of the nation concerned and which would affect US security interests.

One must be careful in using this test, however, for national objectives change, sometimes with changes in government, sometimes without. It is, for example, impossible to be sure about the objectives which will determine West German policy in years to come. Even the Soviets do not always appear to the Western view to act in such a fashion as to serve what we estimate to be their real aims. Moreover, all nations have various objectives, many of which are to some degree incompatible with each other. Sometimes one is governing, sometimes another. Nations can even pursue simultaneously several conflicting objectives, to the confusion of their own citizenry as well as of foreign intelligence officers. We must be very certain, before rejecting a foreign capability as incompatible with a national objective, that the objective is genuine, deeply-felt, and virtually certain to govern the nation's courses of action.

The political, moral, or psychological compulsions which operate on a nation, or on its rulers, make the implementation of some of that nation's physical capabilities unlikely or even impossible. Thus, for example, it would probably be judged that the US is unlikely to undertake a strictly "preventive" war against the USSR because such an action, under any foreseeable US government, would be politically and morally unthinkable. It may similarly be true that the Soviet rulers are psychologically unable to establish a genuine state of peaceful coexistence with capitalist states even though they may proclaim their desire to do so and may judge such a

course of action conducive to the ultimate aims of Communism. There are some things that nations cannot do, despite the fact that they are physically capable of doing them and might serve their national objectives thereby.

To be sure, if a nation is politically, morally, or psychologically incapable of pursuing a given course of action that course of action is not a capability at all, and we need not worry about it. The trouble is, however, that while physical incapabilities can generally be pretty satisfactorily established the same is rarely true of political, moral, or psychological incapabilities. One must depend more on judgment and less upon demonstrable certainty for an estimate in the matter. Not many would have estimated, before the fact, that Tito would be psychologically capable of turning against Stalin, or that the Germans would be morally capable of supporting Hitler, or that the United States would be politically capable of abandoning isolationism. Experience warns us against undue confidence in our estimates of national character, and it will be safer to consider as capabilities all courses of action which a nation is physically able to carry through, rejecting many as improbable but none as impossible.

Finally, we reject from our estimate those capabilities which would, if implemented, lead to such adverse consequences as to be unprofitable. There are, curiously enough, very few foreign capabilities which will pass the tests already mentioned, and then have to be excluded on this ground. This is because most courses of action having indubitably dire consequences will by reason of that fact alone run counter to the objectives or to the political, moral, or psychological compulsions of the nation. Those few which are left are generally military in nature and are apt to be so important that we include them in the estimate anyway. Thus it is clear that general war with the US would be hazardous and perhaps disastrous for the USSR. It therefore seems highly improbable that the Soviets will deliberately run grave risks of involving themselves in such a war, yet no national estimate on the USSR would

omit mention of the capabilities of that nation for conducting war with the US. The same holds true for the capabilities of the Nationalist Chinese to invade the mainland, or of the South Koreans to attack North Korea. We may judge such capabilities improbable of implementation, but we do not exclude them from our estimate.

By applying the tests of importance and of probability, as described above, the vast number of capabilities of any foreign nation will speedily be reduced to manageable proportions. The process of exclusion will at first be almost unconscious — most capabilities will be rejected forthwith, without doubt or debate. When this stage has been accomplished, however, there will still remain a formidably long list which will require more serious consideration. Exclusion becomes more difficult, and begins to require longer discussion and maturer judgment. The same criteria of choice continue valid, but are applied with more deliberation. This is the point at which preparation of the estimate gets interesting, for the choice of capabilities to include or exclude may prove to be the most crucial decision made during the estimating process.

Though we have departed from the military doctrine in allowing a rejection of capabilities judged unlikely of implementation, we may still return to it for an important lesson. Like the military commander, the high policy-maker is entitled to something more than intelligence's opinion of what foreign nations will probably do. He is entitled to be informed of various reasonable alternative possibilities, and to be given some discussion of these alternatives — of their apparent advantages and disadvantages, and of the reasons why intelligence deems them respectively to be less or more likely of implementation. National estimates sometimes discuss only the particular foreign capabilities which the intelligence community in its wisdom believes will actually be carried through. This is going too far in exclusion. Intelligence must winnow the mass of capabilities down to two or three or half a dozen

in each situation examined, but it is the responsibility of policy-makers, not of intelligence agencies, to decide which among these few last alternatives shall in fact constitute the intelligence basis for US policy.

IV

Looking back over old national estimates one is apt to feel that the borrowing of military terminology was sometimes a little over-enthusiastic. The word "capability," for example, offers an almost irresistible temptation to all of us who compose governmental gobbledegook. It is a long, abstract noun, of Latin derivation, and it has a pleasing air of technicality and precision. It will appear to lend portentousness to an otherwise simple statement. Perhaps this is why the word appears in estimates so frequently, unnecessarily, and sometimes even incorrectly.

One trouble is that the word has a perfectly good, non-technical meaning, signifying a quality, capacity, or faculty capable of development. It is commoner in the plural, when it usually denotes in a general way the potentialities of the possessor, as when we say that a man "has good capabilities." This usage is frequent in estimates:

a. The air defense capabilities of the Bloc have increased substantially since 1945.

b. Chinese Communist and North Korean capabilities in North Korea have increased substantially.

c. The capabilities of the new fighter aircraft are superior to those of the old.

No valid objection can be taken to these examples. Indeed, the usage is virtually the same as that of the technical term, for the statements are about the things that the possessors of the capabilities can *do*.

One can find, however, a good many examples of slipshod usage:

a. Satellite capabilities for attack on Greece and particularly on Turkey are too limited for conquest of those countries.

b. The Tudeh Party's capabilities for gaining control of Iran by default are almost certain to increase if the oil dispute is not settled.

There is no good reason for using the word "capabilities" in either of these statements; in the first the word should probably be "resources," in the second, "chances" or "prospects." If one really insists on talking about capabilities then the statements ought to be rephrased: "The Satellites are not capable of conquering Greece or Turkey," and "If the oil dispute is not settled, conditions in Iran will be such that the Tudeh Party may acquire the capability to gain control of the country."

It will be perceived that the immediately foregoing examples are statements of *net* capabilities, and it is in connection with such statements that imprecise drafting most frequently occurs. It must be remembered that in a relationship between two nations (or other organizations) the *gross* capabilities of one side can be increased or decreased only by an increase or decrease in the strength, resources, skills, etc., of that side; what happens on the other side is irrelevant. The *net* capabilities of one side, however, may be altered either by a change in its own strengths and resources or by a change in those of the other side. For example, suppose that the strengths and resources of the United States and the USSR both increase in the same proportion. Then the gross capabilities of each side will have increased, but the net capabilities will have remained unchanged. But, if the USSR should grow weaker, while the United States made no change in its strength, then the net capabilities of the United States would have increased although its gross capabilities remained unchanged.

This is simple enough, but it needs to be understood if drafting is to be accurate and clear. Consider the following example:

> In South Korea and Taiwan where US commitments provide both physical security and political support of the established regimes, present Communist capabilities for political warfare are extremely small. If the US commitment and physical protection were withdrawn for any reason, substantial and early Communist political warfare successes almost certainly would occur.

The first of the two sentences in this quotation can only be understood as a statement concerning gross capabilities, although to be sure the word is used in its non-technical sense. But the second sentence reveals that Communist gross capabilities, far from being "small," are in fact very considerable. The two sentences together constitute a statement of net capabilities, but the drafting is poor. Perhaps a rule to govern this problem may be formulated in this way: when the word "capability" or "capabilities" is used in its non-technical sense, signifying in a general way the qualities, faculties, or potential of the possessor, it must be used only to refer to gross, and never to net capabilities. If there is any question, doubt or difficulty, the word ought to be avoided and a synonym chosen.

Finally, even when using the word in its technical meaning of a specific course of action, the drafter ought always to make clear whether he is referring to gross or net capability. For example:

a. We estimate that the armed forces of the USSR have the capability of overrunning continental Europe within a relatively short period.

b. The Party almost certainly lacks the capability for seizing control of the Japanese government during the period of this estimate.

The first of these statements is unclear because the word "overrunning" does not indicate beyond doubt (as "conquer"

or "defeat" do in some examples previously quoted) whether the statement is or is not one of net capability. Does the sentence mean that the armies of the USSR can overrun Europe against all the opposition that the West may put up? Or does it mean only that the USSR has enough men and logistical apparatus to spread into all of continental Europe within a relatively short period if unopposed? The second example is clearer, but still it does not indicate beyond doubt whether the Party is unable to seize power because the Japanese government is strong enough to prevent it, or whether the Party simply lacks the men and talent to take over the job of governing Japan even if no one opposed its doing so.

Apart from such suggestions for clarity in drafting as those given above, it would be premature to lay down rules for the statement of capabilities in a national intelligence estimate. Sometimes it may be desirable to list them *seriatim*, as the military generally do in their estimates of the enemy situation. This might be a wholesome exercise while drafting an estimate even if it were not retained in the final version, for it would tend to promote precision, to reveal inter-relationships and produce groupings of related capabilities, and thus to prevent the indiscriminate scattering through an estimate of statements of capabilities in bits and pieces. On the other hand, the number and complexity of courses of action which have to be presented may often be so great that extensive listing would be tedious, and attempts at grouping misleading. A connected essay (in which, incidentally, the word capability or capabilities need never appear) may convey the material far more adequately.

These matters will be improved by experimentation, and by the talent of those who draft estimates. Improvement is worth trying for, in this as in other aspects of estimating capabilities. It is a great and responsible task to survey the whole political, economic, and military strengths of a nation, to ascertain its objectives and the moral and political compulsions that govern its conduct, to weigh all these matters in the light of that

nation's relation to other nations, to perceive what that nation could do to affect the security interests of the United States, and to select from among these manifold courses of action those sufficiently important and feasible to be included in a national estimate. The techniques of this task are still in a formative stage. They will develop through experience, through trial and error, through discussion and argument, and perhaps, from time to time, through purely theoretical and doctrinal investigation.